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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes that schools resume their historic role in cultivating basic moral values in their students, based on what is defined as our national ethos: (1) a belief in the worth and perfectability of human life; (2) a belief in democracy; (3) faith in reason and the orderly solution of conflict; (4) respect for knowledge and commitment to universal education; (5) protection of personal liberties; and (6) equal protection under the law and equal opportunity. Relativistic approaches to character education by theorists such as Rath and Kohlberg focus on process to the exclusion of content, whereas others, such as Max Rafferty, promote a narrow set of moral principles and thus overemphasize content. A third alternative strikes a balance by defining character education as a lifelong rational search to acquire the values of our cultural heritage. Character education should begin with development of thinking skills based on a study of literary, political, and philosophical tradition, followed by opportunity for students to confirm the value of moral behavior through their own interaction. (TE)

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CHARACTER EDUCATION

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CHARACTER EDUCATION

M. Donald Thomas

The basic purposes of education in America have not changed very much. Over two hundred years ago, Thomas Jefferson wrote that education should aim at the "improvement of one's moral and faculties." Similarly, a recent Gallup Poll found that Americans, in overwhelming numbers, said: "Help them (students) develop a reliable standard of right and wrong."

The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 states: "Religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged." Ethical principles, in those early days, were extracted from the Bible, Poor Richard's Almanac, the Declaration of Independence, The Constitution, and The Mayflower Compact. Most people believed that education was of little value unless it was coupled with the moral development of the individual.

Our nation has a longstanding core of basic civic values. Those values are the ethos of a nation that binds together people from all parts of the world. It is that common ethos that forms the character of our people. Call it what you will, character education, civic learning, citizenship education, moral training, ethics, or values education; by any other name, it is the same - the ability to participate effectively in the affairs of the nation as a good citizen. A good citizen is one who understands and appreciates the principles under which our nation was founded and lives by them.

An examination of our basic documents and a careful study of our history leads me to conclude that we, as a nation, are committed to the following:

1. Belief in the worth and perfectibility of human life on this earth;

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2. Conviction that democratic societies have more to offer than totalitarian ones;
3. Faith in reason and in the orderly solution of conflict between individuals and between nations;
4. Respect for knowledge and a strong commitment to educate all;
5. Protection of personal liberties within limits established by law;
6. Equal protection under the Law and equal opportunity for personal and economic success.

It appears to me that these basic principles are the curriculum for character education in our schools; they are Jefferson's "morals" and the standards for establishing right and wrong.

If schools are to play a more aggressive role in character education, one must ask if values can be taught. Raths et. al., claim that values cannot be defined, but that they are important to human existence. The assumption is that a child, irrespective of age, does not enter school as a moral tabula rasa. Values already exist, perhaps in a dormant stage. The process of transfer from passive to active awareness is the process of value clarification.

In a way, Raths and his colleagues maintain that how we learn is more important than what we learn, process is more important than content. Values, therefore, are progressive. Their educational worth is determined by the individual who, through rational explorations into the depth of his soul, makes ethical judgments. Any imposition of externally defined values is difficult, because of differences in individual perceptions. There is, therefore, according to this approach, no set of values that are common to all which can be the basis for one's character. Every individual is invited to invent his own moral standards.

Kohlberg's cognitive-developmental approach to character education does not depart from a relativistic system of moral development. Kohlberg relates moral development to stages of human growth. An individual progresses gradually from outer-directedness to inner-directedness. The progress is expedited by education.

Kohlberg, like Raths, refrains from moral finality, except for justice, which is a moral absolute. In the absence of any accepted moral guidelines, it comes as no surprise that an experiment to establish a moral society in a Cambridge, Massachusetts High School, (based on Kohlberg's theory) has been less than a spectacular success.

Both Raths and Kohlberg have as their aim one of establishing moral principles as a basis for the moral society. Their belief that appropriate values are discovered through rational discussion or through developmental growth processes does not insure any of us that character will be established. Nor does it accept that there is, in our nation, a common core of values that should be taught to all students, regardless of their perceptions or their growth patterns.

The antithesis of a relativistic approach to character education was promoted by Max Rafferty, at one time State Superintendent of Education in California. It was his belief that a narrow set of moral principles, properly taught, could solve all educational and social problems. To him, content was more important than anything else.

Without taking an extreme position similar to that of Rafferty, most educational philosophers advocate a balance of process and content. Etzioni states it well: "Dwelling exclusively on procedural matters, moral educators have taught the technique of debate without paying attention to what is being debated." Expanding his criticism, Etzioni maintains that a relativistic approach

to morality has led to self-centeredness and self-seeking. The real value of morality, he claims, is in one's ability to curb impulses and show consideration to the community as a whole.

Philosophers like Etzioni, Rawles, Peters, Scheffler, and others agree that basic moral principles are a necessity. The concept of justice is itself an agreement that there should be principles. An identification of principles and teaching them is an obligation schools should assume.

Principles of morality are necessary. They form the ethics of a society. Values are determined not merely by their inherent worth to the individual, but by how they are perceived by the entire social order. Rawls perceives morality as a learning process which is a rational development of a life plan. Unlike Raths, however, the measure of good within such a plan is determined by its contribution to the rational plan of others. Only the community can ratify a moral practice. To the degree, then, that the esteem and admiration of others confirm what is good, what we do is good for others. The most important good, says Rawls, is self-esteem. Self-esteem is established by a rational life plan and its affirmation and appreciation by others who also benefit from it.

Moral education, then, is not merely soul searching discussions in which ignorance is shared mutually. Rather, character education is a lifelong rational search to acquire the virtues of our cultural heritage. It is a long, hard struggle to behave according to the principles upon which the nation was founded—the ethos, or ethic, of the society.

Teaching and studying the traditions which form our character are an expansion of our intellectual repertoire and the enhancement of our chances to reach acceptable and meaningful ethical standards. This position is summarized by Scheffler:

> "...the moral point of view is attained, if at all, by acquiring a tradition of practice, imbodied in rules and habits of conduct. Without a preliminary emersion in such tradition - an appreciation of the import of its rules, obligations, rights and demands - the concept of choice of action and rules for oneself can hardly be achieved. Yet the prevalent tradition and practice can be taught in such a way as to encourage the ultimate attainment of a superordinate and comprehensive point of view."

What, then, are the antecedents to moral practice? What are the school experiences from which character is formed?

Most philosophers of education agree that the first step in character education is the developing of thinking skills based on a study of tradition. This can be in the form of history, literature, political science, or the fine arts. Each of these disciplines transmits a unique part of human experience which directly examines moral behavior, rationality, and ethical development. Further, these fields of study make it possible to study morality as a whole and not as simple moral dilemmas which involve only a few characters in a relatively uncomplicated situation which students can grasp readily.

Having a cognitive understanding of moral principles is a first step. The second step is the opportunity to practice behaviors which express the principles. Here schools are the best laboratory for such practice. Under the supervision of moral individuals, students can obtain confirmation of their moral behavior. They can also obtain challenge to behaviors that violate moral codes. Thus, character is formed. In this process it is also important that the school itself, the adults within it, model moral conduct. The character attributes we wish to develop in students must also be exhibited by adults who are attempting to teach character development.

What, then, is character education? Character education is learning the moral principles of a society. It is the practice of those principles in human interactions. It is the perpetual struggle to live rationally within the boundaries of democratic traditions. It is the ability to separate good from evil, fairness

from unfairness, justice from injustice, and truth from falsehood. It is a moral code, based on cultural history, which is accepted as the ethic of the society.

In a society where there is so much to be done; in a time when destruction is so powerful it can destroy everything; nothing is of any real consequence, unless we first develop character. That can be done in our schools if we but feel the obligation to do so.

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